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3 May 1960

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Assistant Director, ORR

SUBJECT: GRA Contribution to Power Positions Project

1. In undertaking the task of assessing the role of geographic factors in the determination of future relative power of the Free World versus the Sino-Soviet Bloc, the Geographic Research Area found it necessary to re-examine the qualities of geography that relate to the estimation of strategic power. It was determined that, within the terms of reference of the problem, the significant characteristics are those of location, shape and size. Geography is concerned with the location, identity, and areal inter-relationships of physical and cultural phenomena. It comprehends and assesses a near totality of environmental elements. By this overview, geography contributes insight and understanding relevant to many aspects of a nation's power. The conclusions of geography, however, are valid only in specific contexts: data on the environmental (geographic) elements concerned must have a specificity equivalent to that of the conclusions sought.

2. The geographic factors of terrain, vegetation, climate, population, ethnic groups, resources, industry, transportation and communications, location, size, and shape were evaluated in relation to the problem. It was found that several of these factors could be considered only in gross terms: these were discarded -- in the context of the problem -- as being

SUBJECT: GRA Contribution to Power Positions Project

more susceptible of analysis with elements not essentially geographic, e.g., economy, political organization, national character, military development. The factors of location, size and shape remain uniquely geographic and significant in that they profoundly influence the strategic situation of states or coalitions of states.

3. Many books have been written on the subject of national power and they all treat the classical elements of geography which have influenced the course of events between nations. Written in retrospect, these books can specify the geographic elements which were significant in affecting the course of events, but they do not deal with events in prospect. The geographic elements cannot be shown to have determined the events, but only to have influenced them once the objective for action was established. It is our considered opinion that the elements of geography and conventional geographic factors are not tools that can be used by themselves in the forecasting process. It is necessary that specific assumptions and conditions be given before a meaningful prognosis, based on a quantitative as well as a qualitative application of geographic factors, can be made to the Power Positions paper. Nor is it possible to assess the contributions of each of the three uniquely geographic factors of location, size and shape to an assessment of national or coalition power, because of the amorphous nature of the term "Free World" (and in some respects of the term "Sino-Soviet Bloc"), the major imponderables that are involved in a contrasting of the two coalitions, the time reference of 1965, and 1970, and the unpredictable effects of advancing technology.

SUBJECT: GRA Contribution to Power Positions Project

Here, it was determined that the context of the problem permits only very general conclusions -- e.g., the Free World is characterized by great size and fragmentation, the latter features compounded by the discontinuity of pro-U.S. components. The assessment of the actual significance of these elements would require a degree of specificity of other elements and factors that is lacking in the problem.

4. While it is concluded that geographic factors and the well-known geopolitical hypotheses and doctrines of Mackinder, McMahon et al have limited applicability to the Power Positions estimate, the Geographic Research Area does have a distinct contribution to make. There are two annexes to this memorandum which contain material of significance in the consideration of the problem at hand. Annex A describes the present and possibly future relationships between the Free World and the Sino-Soviet Bloc based on factors which are accepted as being uniquely geographic and significant. Annex B deals with a subject which is not wholly geographic but is of utmost importance in the assessments of the power relationships between the two groups; this is an evaluation of the relative disparity in the extent of knowledge of the physical environment which exists between the Free World and the Sino-Soviet Bloc. The growth and expansion of nations, peacefully or otherwise, is conditioned to a large degree by the state of knowledge which they have of their own and other's physical environment. Any disparity in the degree of such knowledge between nations is bound to place a nation or group of nations not in a position of potential advantage or disadvantage with respect to others. It is felt that an assessment of

SUBJECT: GRA Contribution to Power Positions Project

this factor is of great significance in the preparation of an estimate of power positions.

5. We would encourage the task team to bear in mind during their deliberations the influence of such basic geographic elements as size, shape, and location on the relative power posture of the two international groupings. We feel that geography's greatest contribution can probably be made in the process of coordination of the contributions of other contributors, by which time presumably more refined assumptions and terms of reference will have begun to emerge, permitting a higher degree of specificity in assessing the influence of geographic and quasi-geographic factors on comparative power positions under given sets of circumstances.

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Chief, Geographic Research

Enclosures: 2

1. Annex A
2. Annex B